

Book Reviews

Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment, by Ovamir Anjum, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, xvii + 295 pp., £60.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-107-01406-0

Anjum's original monograph is a welcome contribution to the expanding corpus of Western academic research on the intellectual thought of the prodigious Mamluk traditionalist, Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), whose polemically-natured evaluation of the Ash'arīs revolved around several theological disputes, of which the most quintessential was to do with their hermeneutic precept, the *qānūn al-ta'wīl* (henceforth *qānūn*). The *qānūn* was utilized by the Ash'arīs in their epistemic endeavours to reconcile ostensible variances between reason (*aql*) and revelation (*naql*). Ibn Taymiyya's theological masterpiece, *Dar' ta'ārud al-'aql wa-al-naql* ("The Rejection of the Conflict between Reason and Revelation"), was regarded as a meticulous critique of the "maximalist" articulation of the *qānūn* (148) as presented by the Ash'arī philosophical-theologian Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 607/1210). The monograph argues that the "Taymiyyan moment" was established upon a holistic narrative that encapsulated Ibn Taymiyya's theological thought as a necessary antecedent and epistemological foundation for his larger reformist and revivalist objectives, which were of an overtly political nature. Anjum discusses copious insights; I will delineate only the most essential aspects in order to facilitate a methodical exposition of his main argument.

The book consists of an introduction to the contours of the author's exploration, defining the sources utilized and the modus operandi applied. As a precursor to the main analysis, Anjum critically attempts to demarcate concisely the salient aspects of Islamic political thought. This is followed by two broad parts, the first comprising three chapters dealing with the classical tradition developed by the Ash'arīs. The rationale of this first part is to provide a preamble, which in effect tries to verify the precise composition of the classical tradition that "was most thoroughly questioned and subjected to a 'total critique' from within by Ibn Taymiyya" (32).

Anjum argues in the first chapter that Islam was "a politically vibrant religion" (50); nevertheless, in the formative period there was not one overriding vision of how the caliphate was to operate. Anjum proposes two visions, of which the first was the community-centred (*umma*) vision, which incorporated several necessary aspects, such as an overtly *shūrā*-centric governance and the *umma* as the foremost authority to which the ruler had to be obedient and accountable. The second was the ruler-centred vision, where authority was vested in the ruler rather than in the *umma*. This vision acquired increasing predominance for several reasons, including the disintegration of the *umma* and a preference for a pragmatic attitude, as opposed to *umma*-centric idealism. Neither of the two visions acquired absolute legitimacy, and variants of each were subsequently conceived. The most significant variant was the Sunna-centred vision, a reconfiguration of the community-centred vision, in which the Sunna of the Prophet replaced the authority once vested in the *umma*. Anjum manages to illustrate that there was an uncomfortable tension between the divergent visions of the caliphate and the various actors involved, namely the *umma*, the rulers, and the *'ulamā'*, whose political participation intensified as a result of their exclusive function as the custodians of the Sunna.

In the second chapter, Anjum proceeds to demonstrate how the community-centred vision was displaced by the other divergent visions through an analysis of the political literature put forward by prominent Ash'arī theologians. He argues that this transference had its initial origins in the political thought of juristic traditionalists such as Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798) and Aḥmad ibn

Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). The early Ash'arī theorists, such as al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013) and al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), continued with the political approach of the earlier juristic traditionalists towards the Sunna-centred vision. However, al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058), in his magnum opus, *Al-ahkām al-sultaniyya*, goes further than his intellectual predecessors by implementing a “pragmatic” approach in order to argue for a ruler-centred vision, which Anjum describes as “the political desiccation of Islamic thought” (121). Both al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) and al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) disagreed with al-Māwardī on a number of themes; nonetheless, they presented a similar ruler-centred vision. The disappearance of the *umma* from political authority was the hallmark and intellectual legacy of Ash'arī political thought.

In the third chapter, Anjum explicates the Asharī hermeneutical precept, the *qānūn*, and substantiates exactly how it was the epistemic foundation for their pessimistic approach, which manifested itself in an elitist attitude in various Islamic doctrines and, in particular, with devastating consequences within the political realm, where the *umma* was removed completely from political discourse by the application of the ruler-centred vision of the caliphate. This elitism was established on an esoteric and hierarchical epistemology, coupled with the complete loss of faith in ‘*aql*’, within the Ash'arī scholastic milieu. As a consequence, elitism “undermined, even abhorred, the common sense and practical reasoning of ordinary people” (166), thereby restricting the political authority of the *umma* to an “initiated few.”

Having demonstrated the inadequacies within the classical tradition, Anjum proceeds in the second part to illustrate in four chapters, including the conclusion, how Ibn Taymiyya endeavoured to advance a holistic narrative to address the “elitism and cynicism towards reason” (168) that, in his view, were the principal causes of the political deterioration and malaise with the Muslim world. The fourth chapter proceeds to explain the salient features of “Taymiyyan” thought via an elucidation of his anti-*kalām* theological approach and his polemic disputes with the Ash'arīs. This chapter concludes with a description of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology of “active obedience and disciplined love” (192) as opposed to the Ash'arī conception of God who “neither loves good nor hates evil” (195). In the fifth chapter, the precise details of Ibn Taymiyya’s critique of the Ash'arī hermeneutical precept of the *qānūn* is elaborated by way of a meticulous exposition of his *Dar' ta'āruḍ*. The main objectives of the *Dar' ta'āruḍ* were to demonstrate the incoherence of the *qānūn* and, in turn, to provide an alternative *fīṭra*-centric epistemology. Anjum provides a synopsis of the detrimental consequences of the *qānūn* in the pre- and the post-revelatory discussions within both the theological and the ethico-legal domains. Crucially, the Ash'arīs held a doctrine of strict ethical voluntarism, which maintained that ethical norms were not rational but established exclusively on God’s authority through the scripture. Ibn Taymiyya, having deconstructed the classical tradition, then endeavoured to construct his own holistic alternative narrative.

Anjum insists that, for Ibn Taymiyya, *fīṭra* and ‘*aql*’ were not “functionally equivalent” nor a type of “primordial propositional knowledge”; rather, they were “complementary and interdependent and, therefore insufficient without each other” for attaining knowledge concerning the existence of God and for utilizing the human capacity to discern ethico-legal truths. Thus, *fīṭra* was a divinely ordained tool that could be utilized to differentiate “right reason” from reason’s misguided uses” (223). Effectively, Ibn Taymiyya, through his critique of the *qānūn* and his *fīṭra*-centric epistemology of optimism, was able to provide genuine intellectual encouragement in the ethico-legal and political domains, in contrast to the Ash'arīs who, via their epistemological scepticism towards ‘*aql*’, downplayed these domains as insignificant and void of any ‘*aql*-centric exposition. Ibn Taymiyya insisted that the ethico-legal and political domains were not “empty,” “meaningless” or beyond the confines of ‘*aql*; rather, they were enlightened and discerned by the *fīṭra*-guided ‘*aql*, which Anjum describes as “the hermeneutic primacy of natural reason” (228). Thus, *fīṭra*, contrary to elitism, advocated

the universality of ‘*aql* to all; including ordinary people – which encouraged a “democratic” vision that gave the *umma* political authority.

In the final chapter Anjum attempts to demonstrate the political implications of *fitra*-centric epistemology and maintains that “Taymiyyan” political thought was also informed by a form of “principled pragmatism” (265). Other political leitmotifs are elaborated alongside Taymiyya’s *sui generis* approach to statecraft literature through his monograph *Al-siyāsa al-shari‘iyya*. In the conclusion, Anjum reiterates that the “Taymiyyan moment,” through a meticulous deconstruction of the Ash‘arī view on the ‘*aql-naql* relationship with the principle rationale, defends *naql* and simultaneously liberates ‘*aql* in order to intellectually permeate ethico-legal and political spheres of influence. Ibn Taymiyya’s *fitra*-guided ‘*aql* epistemology of optimism facilitated the politicization of the *umma* and restored its divinely ordained authority via the notion of *al-siyāsa al-shari‘iyya*. Conversely, the classical tradition as developed by the Ash‘arīs led to an elitist and pessimistic *Weltanschauung* due to their epistemological scepticism towards ‘*aql*, which depoliticized the *umma* and provided authority to the rulers through the caliphate theory in medieval Islamic thought.

Anjum is to be recognized for his attempt to provide a “Taymiyyan” narrative. The difficulty of undertaking such attempts can be seen all too easily in Ghazālīan studies, which is still endeavouring to evade the Frank-Marmura impasse. The strength of any such narrative may be ascertained by the extent to which evidence is actually demonstrated rather than merely asserted or implied, and the extent to which it can withstand anomalous interpretative readings. If we apply these two considerations to the “Taymiyyan” narrative, then the subsequent tentative insight can be ascertained: the convergence of the theological, ethico-legal and political thought of Ibn Taymiyya in his reformist and revivalist project has been persuasively demonstrated. Nevertheless, questions still persist: to what extent did the *fitra*-guided ‘*aql* epistemology of optimism actually influence Ibn Taymiyya’s political thought over and above other factors such as his “principled pragmatism”? Furthermore, was it the necessary motivating factor in this discursive tradition? The correlation between epistemological reform and the subsequent political revival is sometimes more asserted than demonstrated, and the matter requires further research. These questions would also be applicable to the classical tradition. Other diverse questions that are undeniably as problematic to resolve would persist; for example, the extent to which Ash‘arism, and by extension the classical tradition, was epistemologically, theologically and politically monolithic through its main periods of development. Further, the epistemological, ethico-legal and political positions of other theological tendencies, such as the Māturīdīs and crucially the Traditionalists, with which Ibn Taymiyya had the greatest intellectual proximity and affinity, would also need further research.

Anjum never maintains that his narrative is anything but tentative; he tries simply to establish the process of a “narrative shift” that will undoubtedly undergo subsequent scholastic refinement. His monograph will be a vastly influential source for researchers, as it endeavours to raise the right types of question. It critically contests the current assumptions, narratives and status of academic scholarship with regard to medieval Islamic thought in general and Ibn Taymiyya’s thought in particular. The monograph offers copious exploratory trajectories for future academic research into a plenitude of “Taymiyyan” and “non-Taymiyyan” themes.

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